

# the LEADER

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## Dare To Experiment, Harvest Data, Urges Plastarc Founder

▶ “Your space is your most powerful, yet underleveraged business tool,” asserts **Melissa Marsh**, founder and CEO of New York City-based **Plastarc**. An expert in workplace strategy and change management services, Marsh insists that any business can increase its performance by looking at its real estate as a tool, rather than just a financial asset, and observing how the workplace impacts personnel. Experimenting and never fearing failure are two keys to success in workplace innovation, she adds. Gathering and learning from the data you collect during the experiment is another.

Marsh holds a Masters of Architecture degree from the **Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT)**. She explains that her background in architecture and social science differentiates her from most of her competitors, and allows her to bring a fresh perspective to her projects.

“Many consulting firms that special-

ize in organizational design started out as accounting firms,” she explains. “They tend to give you recommendations for a new performance management system. My work is business consulting in the medium of real estate, especially architecture and interior solutions.

“I’ll start by asking, ‘Why do you have space to begin with?’ Presumably you want an exceptional space to bring people together, so the next question is, *How can we achieve the highest and best use of this space?*”

Plastarc is a young company, not quite two years old, with four full-time team members, but the practice is bigger than it looks, Marsh explains. It includes more than a dozen “committed consultants” on call from academic and research organizations, plus formal and informal partnerships with architecture, real estate, technology and project management firms.

“We’re a new model of a company,” she explains. “We offer a network of the

right people where and when you want them, and leverage technology well.”

Over the course of her career Marsh has had the opportunity to work with clients at key moments of transformation. She often combines research, design, policy and education with new physical environments. Marsh says she considers many of the organizations that hire her are collaborators, as much as clients. Among many others, she has worked with **BBVA** (Madrid and Mexico City), **Capital One** (Richmond, Va.), **Cisco Systems** (San José, Calif.), **Pfizer** (New York City), and the **United Nations**.

For the **U.S. General Services Administration**, she designed and delivered an executive education program for 1,100 real estate specialists in 12 regions across the U.S. Marsh has also contributed to professional development courses for **CoreNet Global**, **AIA** and several university programs.

Plastarc works with client companies of all ages and sizes; Marsh says she’s often asked to help an older company operate with a new and fresh perspective. Mature companies are often looking to become more nimble and flexible, while young companies are seeking to develop standards and methods for managing space. Both present opportunities to leverage workplace.

“We collaborate with **WeWork**, which is a coworking enterprise that’s just taking off: They’ve opened eight buildings in Manhattan in the past couple of years,” she says. “Large organizations like **American**

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“We become immune to physical environment over time, and we are underserving ourselves by not figuring out why it’s not working. If it’s not working, the solution is not to wait for the best answer, but to try something else and see if it works better.”

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Express are taking space in these coworking buildings, so that some of their team members can operate like startups.” This demonstrates both the approach of driving business with place-making decisions, as well as new space models being a resource for experimentation.

Marsh says she decided on a career in workplace strategy and change management during her student days at MIT, when she was in London on a summer internship. She was working for Arup, a multidisciplinary firm that engineered the London Millennium Bridge, which opened in 2000.

“This pedestrian bridge spans the River Thames, and connects Bankside at the Tate Modern with the City of London at St. Paul’s,” Marsh explains. “Londoners immediately nicknamed it the ‘Wobbly Bridge,’ because people walking across it experienced a swaying motion, and it was closed just three days after it opened.”

Arup, and others, worked for the next two years on research followed by modifications to eliminate the wobble. Being part of the discovery process, Marsh says, was a career-changing experience. She was on the team that was in charge of diagnostics, which involved detailed measurements: weighing everyone as they got on the bridge, taking videos of people crossing the bridge at various speeds and analyzing audio recordings that had been strapped to walker ankles, and so on.

“The greater significance of that project for me was that I had not previously had the experience of measuring people in an urban-scale architectural environment,” Marsh says. “The bridge project made me understand that we can measure people relative to space, and vice versa. The technology that has come into play since then, to perfect that measurement, presents a tidal wave of opportunities. We can measure people’s likes and dislikes and their self-reported productivity. One of the bases of my firm is a focus on learning the needs, desires and preferences of people in relation to creating the optimal real estate environment.”

Many of Marsh’s would-be clients fail

to capture data that they could collect whenever they contemplate or execute an improvement in space management – data that would inform the next project. Marsh believes that virtually anything can be measured – “soft” as well as “hard” metrics.

“So many CEOs believe they have access to data but are unable to act on it,” she says. “We might be sitting on information that we’re not using the right way.

“We become immune to physical environment over time, and we are underserving ourselves by not figuring out why it’s not working. If it’s not working, the solution is not to wait for the best answer, but to try something else and see if it works better. It’s a matter of using the scientific process that we learned in kindergarten, which is to make an observation – ‘I see something happening’ – then ask why it’s happening, do some research and create a hypothesis.”

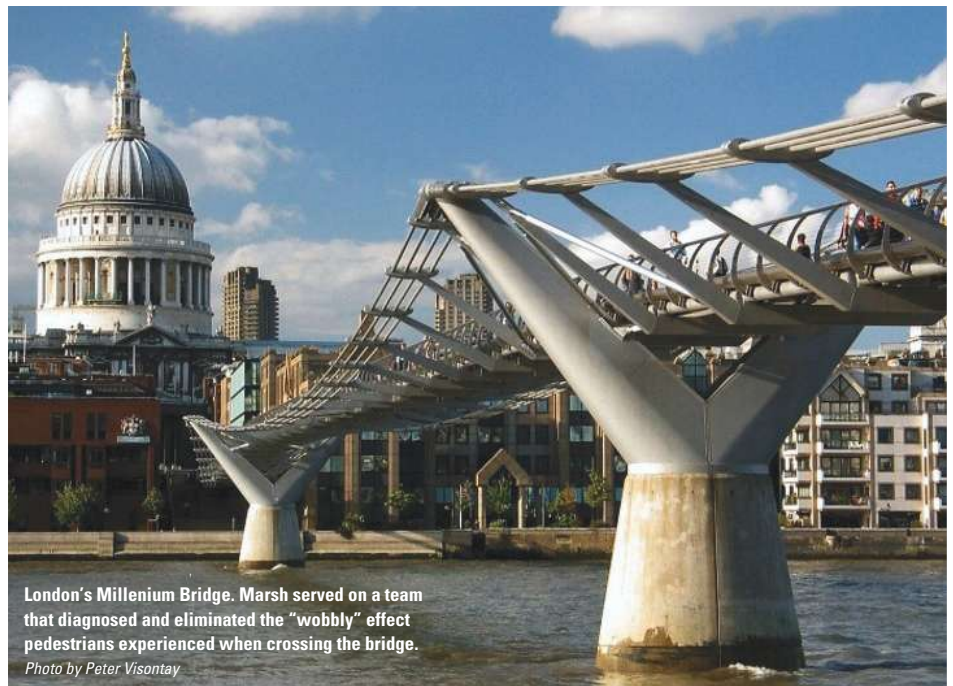
Then, Marsh’s process is to set up an experiment that will enable her and the client to track the results, collect data, analyze the results and project or recommend future solutions or future research.

“One of the things on which I pride myself most is making clients look good



Melissa Marsh  
CEO, PLASTARC

within their organization,” she concludes. “I do this by building opportunities for continuous research and learning into my projects. I find that sometimes when clients say they need certain data, they sometimes spend a lot of effort to get it on a one-off basis, rather than finding ways to continually get those data in the context of their organization, embedding current space management data into future business processes.”



London's Millennium Bridge. Marsh served on a team that diagnosed and eliminated the “wobbly” effect pedestrians experienced when crossing the bridge.

Photo by Peter Visantay